



## “Meet Dominique Baker”

Dominique Baker married her high school sweetheart and planned to pursue a degree in social work, but her first semester in college proved to be both financially and mentally exhausting. As her family grew and Dominique took stock of the things she wanted for herself and her two children, she made the decision to leave her husband at age 25 and focus on her family’s future. She was inspired by a friend to return to school for a medical billing degree back home in Michigan. The move posed many challenges, and when a close family member passed away unexpectedly, Dominique had a mental breakdown. She faced housing insecurity and even made the best of living in a shelter while studying. And when she sought support from family and the help of professionals, she was able to get through one of the darkest periods of her life, and develop the tools to stay focused on her educational goals. Reporter Brenda León shares Dominique’s story.

---

David Croom: Welcome to season two of 1 in 5, which takes its name from the one in five college students in the US who are also parents. I'm David Croom, from Ascend at the Aspen Institute. This season, remarkable student parents, past and present, share their educational and professional achievements and the pitfalls they've encountered along the way. Each episode reveals a different stage in the journey toward earning a degree or credential and a roadmap for overcoming obstacles to access support and opportunity.

In this episode, we're spending time with Cherrill Dominique Baker in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Dominique is a young mother of two who always wondered how to make the world a better place. After she became a parent, she began to reexamine how she would teach her children to pursue their own happiness, and she started by doing it for herself. Reporter Brenda Leon brings us Dominique's story.

León: Dominique Baker married her high school sweetheart. When they met, Dominique was a senior and he was a junior. A year after Dominique graduated, they made a home together.

Dominique Baker: And I think our marriage was just that very young innocent kind of love where you just think you know everything and you think you know how you want your life to be. And when real world issues and problems started to arise, I think we realized we might be in over our head. We might not mesh and want the same things out of life.

León: Before their marriage, Dominique enrolled at [South Piedmont Community College](#) in Monroe, North Carolina, where she intended to pursue a degree in social work.

Baker: But then I took a semester off, which just snowballed into just not re-enrolling and then I'm starting to work.

León: Dominique's tuition was going to be around \$2,300. And while Dominique received financial aid, the additional costs and the demands of college became a burden.

Baker: And I think I was one of those people who's like, "I just can't look at another book. I can't take any more information in right now. I kind of just want a change of pace, something different." And so that's where it kind of was like, "Okay, I'm just going to go to work. School will always be there."

León: So she found a full-time job at a deli.

Baker: It was my first big grownup job. So those little \$200 checks every two weeks seemed like a lot of money at the time.

León: Dominique's now ex-husband, graduated from high school and he decided to enlist in the Army. This decision would move the young couple from North Carolina to Maryland where he was based.

Baker: We were really, really, really young. So him taking that leap to get into the military, it felt like we had it all figured out, you know what I mean? Not a lot of people our age are graduating high school, getting married, and have a career.

León: The move lunged them into adulthood. Dominique was excited for her marriage. She imagined they would grow together and be there for one another to push each other forward. Soon their family would grow.

Baker: I took three pregnancy tests because I just was like, I don't think this is real life. And it's that moment when you see those lines and you're like, my life is going to change forever. I'm no longer going to be the same person, but in the most exciting and rebirth kind of way. When he's born, then I'm reborn again because I'm just a different person now.

León: At the time, Dominique was 21 and she and her then husband welcomed Caden on New Year's Eve 2015.

Baker: And I feel like at the time I thought I was so grown. I really did. I was living on my own. I was married so I thought, but looking back, I'm like, she was a baby. She was a baby having a baby.

León: Dominique became a stay-at-home mom while her then husband was starting out in the military. This meant that while he was in training mornings and evenings, Dominique was alone with their newborn son while keeping up with house chores. And for the first time ever, away from her family's support.

Baker: I think that built that strong bond with me and Caden because I'm just like, "It's me and you baby. It's just me and you." And I had to learn a lot of things and a lot of trial and errors, and it can be very lonely. But I don't think it impacted our co-parenting, but I think it just made me stronger as a mom.

León: But a few months later, her then husband left the army. Dominique says to this day, she doesn't know why he left, but did her best to support him. Leaving the service meant they needed help with housing and expenses. So they packed up their things and moved in with Dominique's mom.

Baker: And that's where Maverick was born. And so from then on, we just stayed with my mom in North Carolina just trying to get on our feet because it's not easy coming out of the military and trying to get your footing in the door and everything.

León: They were back at square one. Now a mother of two, Dominique began to feel stunted in her own growth.

Baker: I was working at Amazon part-time, and just living with my mom, my sister, my brother, my cousin, and my ex. We all lived in a house together with the two small kids.

León: The family of four shared a single bedroom while they tried to get back on their feet, but the young couple began to grow apart. They had different parenting styles and opposing views of the world. Dominique also began to feel lonely.

Baker: I didn't feel seen, you know what I mean? And I wrapped myself so far into being a mom. I felt like even though I was in the marriage, I was doing a lot of things on my own. And so for me, it was just like I could stay here and I could do this or I could leave and figure it out.

León: She decided to leave her marriage.

Baker: So I think once I realized I want more and we're not growing together, it's time for me to go. And that wasn't an easy choice, but it was one that I knew I had to make.

León: And one she had to follow through with. One study showed that 22% of marriages for young women between the ages of 25 and 29 end in divorce.

Baker: But obviously with that and being young and in a relationship and marriage, obviously you don't really know what you sign up for until you get into it. And I think, on both of our ends, had a lot of growing up to do.

León: Dominique never imagined she'd be a divorcee at 25, and from one day to another, be the sole provider for her children.

Baker: I had no idea what the future was going to hold for me, but I knew all the things that I didn't want to bring into my future.

León: She didn't want the sense of stagnation that came from feeling isolated in her marriage. After her then husband moved out, Dominique says she felt like she had a clean slate. While her core support came from her mother and sister in North Carolina, roughly six months after her divorce, Dominique began to think seriously about returning to Michigan where she was born and raised. She'd remained in touch with her friend Pash, whom she met in her junior year of high school. Pash, a single mother of three, told her about [WMCAT, the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology](#), a nonprofit education and training center in Grand Rapids.

Baker: And so she was going through something similar, just trying to find her way as a single mom, and she ended up coming across WMCAT. I remember her being in school for medical billing and all that kind of stuff and I never really dug deep into what it was. I was just proud of her for going back to school with three small kids. I'm like, that's amazing, I could never. And so I think once me and her started talking more and I was telling her how I wanted to move back...

León: After nearly a seven-year hiatus, Dominique began to explore the medical billing field as a professional possibility. She wanted a career and she began to feel excited about the possibility of moving back to Michigan with her children.

Baker: I could stay here and I could do this, or I could leave and figure it out.

León: But the COVID-19 pandemic forced her to postpone her plans.

Baker: And then my sister-in-law passed away in the beginning of 2020 as well. So I think that's when everything was really starting to get really, really, really crazy. And that triggered a really, really, really horrible dark mental breakdown with me. I've always struggled with anxiety and depression and I just hit rock bottom after she passed away.

León: Her sister-in-law died in her sleep and at the time they weren't on the best of terms; sending Dominique into deep grief. For days, Dominique couldn't eat or sleep.

Baker: I was losing weight. I was probably at the smallest I've ever been at like 120 pounds because I couldn't eat anything, while still trying to be a mom. You get a mental breakdown, but you don't stop being a parent.

León: And while Dominique is still parenting during the COVID-19 lockdown, her mother also stepped into parent Dominique during one of the hardest and darkest periods of her life.

Baker: And so for me, that was just such a trigger for me that I was not sleeping. So she would come home from work because she worked third shift, and I would just be up and I would just be crying. And the only way for me to go to sleep was to crawl in the bed with my mom like a big baby, a grown big baby, get in the bed with my mom and I could finally get a couple hours of sleep.

León: During this time of grief and uncertainty, Dominique struggled to see a future for herself and her children. Slowly, her mother encouraged her to seek professional help and therapy.

At the height of the pandemic, the [World Health Organization estimates](#) the overall prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by 25%. Among those most impacted were women and young people who were also disproportionately at risk for suicidal and self-harming behaviors. Feelings of anguish after loss can set off an anxious state or depression.

Baker: I've never been a person who's been good at handling death. That's not something that I've ever been good at. And my family knows that, it hits me worse than anybody. And so losing her, and she was so young and it was so unexpected, and we weren't on the best of terms at the time, it just sent me spiraling.

León: Dominique felt so troubled by her loss.

Baker: I didn't think that I was going to survive the place that I was at because it felt like I was at rock bottom and then dug down deeper into the soil of rock bottom.

León: With medical support, therapy, and the love of her family, by the summer of 2020, Dominique finally began to feel like herself again. Her recovery was a slow process of feeling supported, maintaining hope and finding the right care. [According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), 65% of people living with serious mental illness experience partial to full recovery over time. For Dominique, the stigma that came along with struggling with her mental health diminished when she felt supported and affirmed without judgment by her family.

Baker: Honestly, I have to give all the praise to my mom. She gave me that validation and that place that it made me feel safe to not have to pretend like I'm okay. You know what I mean? And I think that is such an important thing to have when you have mental health issues or anxiety, is you need to have a person or a place or a space where no matter what you say, it feels safe, that you can't fully embrace it.

León: Finding the right care was also a key component of her recovery.

Baker: I'm thankful for that support of having her there and making sure that I'm talking to my doctor about my medication. And that's hard as well because when you're switching medications, those side effects will make you not want to stay on it. But I had the space to be on it and be like, "This is making me feel this way. Let's try something different." Until I found what worked for me and also her getting me back into therapy.

León: The next step in her recovery was following through with her therapies, supervised medication and structured help. Looking back, Dominique says the work was grueling, but it's the reason she's here today. So she picked up her plans to return to Michigan.

Baker: I'm fast tracking it now. I'm like, this is what I need to do. This is what I want to do and I'm going to do it no matter what. I'm going to figure it out because the fight I just put myself through and the fight that I just had for literally my life, there's no excuse now. We're just, we're going to do it. So I'm moving to Michigan. No job, no car, just a dream and hope.

León: During the pandemic, Dominique lost her main source of income, the warehouse job at Amazon that had kept her afloat on \$15 an hour. When she decided to move to Michigan, she reconnected with Pasha, who was now working in medical billing. Dominique was 26 and hungry for change. She wanted to know how she could work towards a better paying job to provide for her family in Grand Rapids. She did some research on WMCAT and learned that she would need to take a placement test to enroll there.

Baker: I was signing up for school while I was in North Carolina. So I was having to fly from North Carolina to Michigan, take a test, fly back. I failed a portion of the test, had to fly back to Michigan, retake that portion of the test, fly back, all while I'm trying to pack and move and do all these other things in North Carolina and hoping like, please let me pass so that I can go to school.

León: Doing all of this while trying to secure stable housing was not a smooth process.

Baker: There was so many roadblocks and I was just like I'm going to crash through anything that stands in my way. I'm going to do it because no one on the outside that didn't live with me knows the fight that I had to get here. And so I'm like, now that I'm here, we're busting through all the doors because I didn't think I would be here. So now it's like, we're going to make life worth living.

León: In the spring of 2021, Dominique was accepted to WMCAT's medical billing program, a six-month accelerated course. She was now on her way to Grand Rapids, but she didn't have secure housing. She'd been looking, but when she found an apartment she could afford, it was uninhabitable. Without steady income, Dominique didn't have many options.

In some ways, Dominique represents a common reality among college students. [A 2019 survey](#) published by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that nearly all college students experienced challenges in securing basic needs like housing and food. But those challenges were especially high among student parents. The report states that over two thirds of parenting students reported housing insecurity. Dominique reached out to her siblings in Michigan, and like many families experiencing housing insecurity, they doubled up. First, she stayed in her brother's house for some weeks, but with two small children, the arrangement did not work out. This time in her life was full of uncertainty and chaos. Dominique, however, remains hopeful by acknowledging that she was taking a leap for a better future for her and her children, a coping mechanism she learned in therapy. She continued to ask for help. Then her sister took her and her children in.

Baker: I'm thankful she opened her door for me, but I was staying on a couch. My kids were sharing rooms with their cousins and school's getting ready to start for me. I don't have

transportation and school's starting for the boys as well. So I'm like, I have to figure out how to get myself and my kids to school every day. I'm in over my head. My sister has four kids. I have two kids. We're two single moms. It's very chaotic to say the least.

León: To celebrate her 27th birthday in May, her family organized to get together and that's where she met Darrell Harris, her best friend's brother. Darrell was a young parent himself, but slightly older than Dominique. Also a single parent, he identified with Dominique's push to start over without a core support system, while trying to secure housing and a job. They became close friends and supported each other in their parenting journey; sometimes offering to babysit or lend an ear.

Darrell Harris: However, I can provide support. There's been plenty of times when I'm babysitting. I just have a house full of children, but even as a young man, that never bothered me because I understand that when you're talking about single mothers, there isn't a lot of free time. They have to be the providers and the nurturers.

Baker: I think he was a really, really, really good support just always believing in me, never talking fear into my plans. I think having somebody believing you even when you can't see it helps push you through because it's like, "Okay, well, I don't know what you see, but I'm going to try. Let's see if you know what you're talking about because I can't see what you're talking about. I think it's time to throw in the towel." And there was a lot of times where I'm like, yeah, I'm done. I'm going to drop out of school and I'm just going to be a failure.

León: Countless times throughout, Dominique is ready to call it quits. But time and time again, a little tough love from Darrell would go a long way. By September, Dominique is preparing to adjust her schedules. Caden and Maverick are starting a new school in a new state after a year of remote learning, and Dominique is excited to start her program at WMACT. At this point, she still has no steady income and no car, but she does have stable housing. As the temperatures begin to drop in October, Dominique is slowly picking up the pace to settle in Michigan. During the winter in Michigan, temperatures drop to an average low of 18 degrees. These conditions make it hard to access public transportation, especially with small children like Caden and Maverick, who were four and five at the time.

Harris: But then even ride sharing and things like Uber and Lyft, that can get pretty expensive after one week. I've had to do that before and it's not pleasant and it's definitely not easy on your pocket. That just would've made her struggle a lot tougher than it already was. I've a relative that sells cars. So I reached out to him to see if he had anything available and we just went from there.

León: Darrell found Dominique a 2009 great Pontiac to get back and forth.

Baker: He was just like, "You and the boys are not going to be out here in the winter time with no car and you need to get back and forth to school." And so he really stuck his neck out for me.

- León: Even though she overcame one major hurdle by getting a car, Dominique's life was about to be turned upside down.
- Baker: It's wintertime. My sister gets a letter and they're like, "You got somebody staying with you and they got to go." And so I'm like, I'm in school and I have to find somewhere for me to go. I don't know where me and my kids are about to go. So I ended up moving into a shelter at this time.
- León: The sisters received a notice before Thanksgiving week. Determined to make traditions and joyful memories with her children, Dominique decided she would move shortly after the school winter break. Her first call was to the [211 public information line](#). They redirected her to the [Salvation Army](#) and a series of other shelters that might have a vacancy.
- Baker: And so it took maybe a week and a half, two weeks of calling these numbers and calling back and just kind of being like, "Hey, I literally have nowhere to stay. Me and my kids are about to be homeless and sleeping in our car because I have nowhere to go," before someone was like, "Yeah, okay, we have openings for you guys at the shelter."
- León: Dominique and her children ended up at [Mel Trotter Ministries](#). The ministry's website says that in West Michigan, the three fastest growing groups experiencing housing insecurity are women, families with children, and unaccompanied youth. According to a survey conducted by the US Census Bureau, by the ends of April 2020, 40% of Black renters reported having little to no confidence in their ability to pay for the next month's rent. And nearly 75% of the families in need of shelter were people of color. In response to the growing crisis, Kent County allocated nearly \$3.5 million to assist residents with housing, utilities, rent and mortgage payments. The county also issued an additional \$4.7 million for housing assistance, including hotel and motel vouchers for people experiencing homelessness. While transitioning to the shelter, Dominique was still attending classes at WMCAT.
- Baker: It was for medical billing and it's hybrid, so it's fast paced, and so I'm having to stay on top of my work. You miss a day, that's missing a week. So I'm like, I can't afford to not come to class even though I'm trying to figure out my housing situation. I still got to show up.
- León: AS the holiday season approach, Dominique was in school but out of work. In the shelter, you aren't allowed to bring food or keep your belongings. Her two young children with her, Dominique often kept snacks in her car. She would scrape change together to feed her children, and sometimes they didn't have enough to eat.
- Baker: One day I thought I locked my door and I didn't, and somebody came in, stole all my snacks, stole my son's backpacks, stole his snow boots. They just took everything. I think that was the point where I'm like, "Okay, I feel so defeated now. I feel so defeated." My son doesn't have snow shoes, he doesn't have his backpack. All of the food that I had in here for them is gone.
- León: In the middle of this, she had to show up for an online class.



- Baker: Then I just remember logging in and bawling my eyes out on camera because I'm just like, I don't know how much more of this I can take. How many battles can I be put through and try to keep this upbeat attitude? What am I doing this for? I'm in a homeless shelter right now. I am basically living in the shelter and out of my car and I'm supposed to just keep fighting forward in school. Why? What am I doing this for?
- León: Several times, Dominique wanted to quit and return to North Carolina with her mother. The stressors were affecting her mental health, even though she found herself being more open about what she was going through. Nationally, student parents are more likely to report feelings of overwhelming stress due to the constant struggle to meet basic needs like buying groceries, paying bills on time, or finding peer support. In a recent study published by the [JED Foundation and Ascend](#), 43% of student parents reported feeling stressed all or most of the time. Nearly half of student parents between 18 and 45 reported considering dropping out. Dominique began to ease her own doubts by seeking support from her friends and classmates.
- Baker: And I think that's where the importance of community comes in and the importance of having a support system, especially when you're a parent, because you have to be the strong one for your kids. You need somebody to lean on. And I think for me, through this journey, I've learned the strength of vulnerability. We're taught that it's easier to just hold it on all in and you figure it out and you just power through it. But I learned for me, my strength comes from being vulnerable.
- León: This year at WMCAT, 75% of students are parents who are pursuing education and workforce training. While Dominique was there, Andrea Owens was the Success Navigator. In that role, Andrea helped prospective students enroll in school.
- Andrea Owens: And so during that time is when I met Ms. Dominique coming in to do her TAPE assessment, which is part of the onboarding process. And like with many students, we just hit it off.
- León: WMCAT also works with other agencies that help students overcome barriers that may hinder their educational journey. As Christmas was approaching, Dominique was trying to hold on to her dreams. She didn't want her children to feel like they would have to miss out on the holidays. At her school, Andrea and the staff spoke about an anonymous community partner interested in assisting families experiencing hardship as the holiday approached. They agreed that Dominique would benefit from that support.
- Owens: Not because of her hardships, but because of her resilience. Dominique, throughout the program, she had several struggles, but in the midst of that she kept pushing, she kept fighting.
- León: At her children's school, Dominique didn't feel comfortable sharing her experience with her sons' teachers. She didn't think everyone needed to know about the hardship she was

experiencing. In a way, she was maintaining her dignity by finding a way out on her own with people she trusted.

Baker: I'm a young mom. I'm a young single mom. I'm a young single Black mom. You know what I mean? So it's all these stereotypes. It's all these different things that I'm facing. And so for me, it's like I can't really feed into those narratives.

León: A few days before Christmas, Dominique and Darrell took a trip to the dollar store and picked up some decorations to liven up the shelter room where she would spend the holidays with her boys.

Baker: Christmastime, we're watching the same shows that we were watching. We're going to get under the blanket, we're going to watch it together. We're going to do this as a family because at the end of the day, aside from the gifts and they got great gifts, that's what it's about. It's about making those memories for them that they'll always be able to look back and be like, "I remember us watching this in the hotel and I'm fine with it being the hotel." You know what I mean?

León: Now, five and six years old, Caden and Maverick remember this period of housing and security as the time they lived in the hotel. And while she kept apartment hunting, Dominique sought help from various nonprofit organizations, including the [Rockford Housing Authority](#). She qualified for a rental assistance voucher, but had to find an apartment within 90 days of receiving it. And most landlords require prospective tenants to earn a monthly income two or three times the monthly rent.

Baker: You can ask for an extension and they give you like, maybe another 30 days, and I could not find anything that would accept me, like no place. And I would always just get so close or I would have somebody call me and then they would be like, "No." With that timeframe and the extension, because I got the extension as well, I still was not able to find a place in that time, and so I lost out on that voucher. And I think that was just so frustrating because it's just like if I was able to do these things, I wouldn't need these vouchers.

León: She found additional support from [Community Rebuilders](#), a nonprofit organization that helps unhoused families to secure housing. Their housing first approach supports clients to reach the housing affordability standard. In order for consumers to reach the ability to pay their bills, their rent should not take up more than 30% of their income. To make housing costs truly affordable, Community Rebuilders pays the difference using funds from [HUD](#), the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. At WMCAT, she developed a close relationship with Andrea Owens. As she became more open to sharing her vulnerabilities, she began to see Andrea as a mother figure, and together they looked for housing alternatives.

In total, Dominique spent five months in the shelter before finding a permanent place to stay. By March 2022, Dominique and her two boys moved into a duplex that Andrea secured through a relative. Community Rebuilders supported Dominique with her rent expenses as their approach is to help families remain in permanent housing. One study

shows that families who can access services that provide safe, affordable housing also experienced improved physical and mental health, an increase in their income, and increased access to healthcare. On June 9th, 2022, Dominique graduated from WMCAT's medical billing program with a certified Revenue Cycle Specialist credential. She shared the celebration with her son, Caden, who graduated from kindergarten on the same day. That day, she also overcame her fear of public speaking.

Baker: I made a mission for myself that I was going to start stepping out of my comfort zone because I was just like, I feel so empowered I did all this. Everything that I had been through... At this time of graduation, I had moved into my house now, so I'm out of the shelter. I have a job. I have my car. So I was like, "I just feel so strong." And so they were looking for speakers for graduation, and I'm like, you know what, I'm going to do it.

León: Dominique completed the program at the top of her class. She's now a business office coordinator for [Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospitals](#) where she works in scheduling and insurance verification. She's also a parent advisor at [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#) where she shares her experience to other parents. At home, Sundays, Dominique wakes up in disbelief.

Baker: I'm just like, I can't believe I have my own house. And this is like I've lived with my ex when we lived on base. So we had a house that I've decorated before, but this is mine, this is mine.

León: Dominique is surrounded by Buddhist statues. She has a fireplace, comfy, fuzzy blankets everywhere and snacks, lots of them. She's made a welcoming home for her guests. Looking back, she says reaching the milestone and being open about her mental health can help her teach Caden and Maverick that people can be strong and vulnerable at the same time.

David Croom: Dominique Baker is a graduate of the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology. Thank you for listening.

1 in 5 is produced by [LWC Studios](#) and presented by [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#), which is a catalyst and convener for systems policy and social impact leaders working to create a society where every family passes a legacy of prosperity and wellbeing from one generation to the next. To learn more about student parents and resources for them, please visit [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](http://ascend.aspeninstitute.org) and follow [@AspenAscend](#) on Twitter.

Brenda León wrote and produced this episode. Editors are Monica Lopez and Juleyka Lantigua. Paulina Velasco is our managing producer. Our theme song is Ascenders by Kojin Tashiro, who also mixed this episode. Catherine Nouhan fact-checked it. I'm David Croom. Subscribe to 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

**CITATION:**

Leon, Brenda, reporter. "Meet Dominique Baker" *1 in 5 Podcast*, Ascend at Aspen Institute, March 21, 2023.  
[Ascend.AspenInstitute.org](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org).